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The Problem of Internalized Racism

Racism, in itself, is divisive and deeply-rooted custom in the United States whose presence causes a blatant disruption of core American beliefs in freedom and equality. In recent years, racial controversy has found its way to political and social platforms, resulting in numerous protests and riots. Unfortunately, it is rather common for one to think that racism is a belief that should be categorized as a race-to-race issue, almost as if it is an interaction between two different parties. However, there is a very problematic form of racism that is not as discoursed in today's world: internalized racism. Internalized racism is defined by sociologist Stuart Hall as, "the 'subjection' of the victims of racism to the mystifications of the very racist ideology which imprison and define them." For years, psychologists have conducted social experiments to grow closer to an understanding of what causes it and its branching effects. The ultimate conclusion is clear: internalized racism is prevalent in the black community because it is rooted in the raging self-esteem struggles sparked by centuries of unjust prejudice and belittlement.

In the 1940s, African-American psychologists Dr. Kenneth and Mamie Clark conducted a series of experiments on black children with one overlying objective in mind: to study how substandard the black perception of self is and how the social status quo affects this perception. What they found would prove pivotal in the course of American history, serving as expert

witness evidence for *Briggs v. Elliott* (1952) and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Using a brown and a white doll as stand-ins for humans, the Clarks asked young children which doll is more beautiful, which doll they rather play with, which doll is the “nicer” doll, and which doll is the “bad” doll. Results showed that the black children showed a pronounced preference for the white doll in every manner. This finding was revolutionary at the time because it shed light to a phenomenon that was unproven and not quite understood. Not only did the kids have an apparent understanding of race, they at a young age had already internalized the idea the black people are inferior to white people. The Clarks concluded that this mentality was perpetuated by the infamous “separate but equal” legal doctrine that was employed in schools and in the general public at the time. This historical policy was, in fact, not heeded well. The mistreatment of blacks continued to thrive, and many whites thought of “separate but equal” as sanction for segregation under the law. Segregation is one of the many oppressive systems that had lasting emotional and mental effects on black Americans. These effects have been categorized as a new mental illness coined Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. PTSS suggests that years of physical pain, mass incarceration, Jim Crow laws, and emotional abuse have created a fear complex in the mentality of black Americans that warp their cognition of self and the world around them. According to psychologist Dr. Joy DeGruy, this form of untreated PTSD can be passed on genetically from generation to generation, which leads to the mental aspects of it being inescapable, and though far removed from the slavery generation, black people are able to carry mental traits of their ancestors. For example, Uncle Tom syndrome is a psychological concept that refers to the coping skill of submissiveness as response to a threat or animosity in order to preserve oneself from pain. This survival technique was developed by many American slaves,

sacrificing their self-esteem and respect for a vague feeling of safety. This mental submissiveness to the oppressor has been passed down, another reason for the high prevalence of black internalized racism. Since it is embedded in genetics, it would be difficult for a generation to rid themselves of the self-oppressing mindset.

In 1903, W.E.B DuBois coined the term internalized racism. DuBois began to look into his sociological theory of double consciousness, a psychological concept that suggests that the human identity is capable of being divided into several parts. DuBois proposed that black Americans have a hard time uniting their black identity with their American identity due to years of social repression in America, leading many to devalue one of those aspects of their humanness. He believed that blacks are likely to see themselves through the lens of society, since the public worldview is so prevailing. Therefore, it is common for black Americans to consider themselves inferior or subpar. It is regular human psychology to believe something after being told it enough times. The Illusory Truth Effect is the idea that “repetition of an assertion increases the degree of belief in that assertion. (Hertwig, “The Reiteration Effect in Hindsight Bias”)” This effect helps sociologists come to a deeper understanding of what internalized racism is and how it spreads. Since America’s black population have often been reminded of their inferiority to white Americans (lynchings, segregation etc.), the tendency of blacks to condemn their own race as inferior is higher because, for much of American history, it has been the general worldview of the country. The psychological aspect of internalized racism is actually a normal human reaction to social views, which is why the national prejudicial notions of black Americans influences how many black Americans perceive themselves.

Although internalized racism may only seem relevant to minority communities, it should in fact concern anyone who cares about race relations because it causes conflicting viewpoints of what should be done for the betterment of these relations, which hinders progress in general. Internalized racism amplifies racist ideals to the point that it may be difficult to make consensual changes to fix infamous racial issues, such as police brutality and criminal profiling. It is vital to understand that the more people against racism, the more that can be done to ensure that it is not passed down to the next generation. Examining and preventing its causes will slowly decrease its commonality, since its general cause is the internal absorption of oppressive attitudes. Living as a minority in a country against minority progression is immensely detrimental to the ego and feelings of belonging. However, in social times of trial, it is vital to honor the words of the wise W.E.B. DuBois, "In all things purely social we can be as separate as the five fingers, and yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."

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